4th Sunday in Advent 2024

Everyone knows the “Hail Mary”. We have been familiar with it from our earliest days, perhaps too familiar, in that all too frequently, we can rattle it off without thinking! It is worth pausing to consider this beautiful scriptural prayer, drawn from the opening passages of the Gospel of St. Luke – which together with the “Our Father” and the “Glory be to the Father”, is for many the core of our Catholic treasury of prayer.

Have you ever noticed that, in honouring Mary by praying the “Hail Mary”, we begin by first using the Archangel Gabriel’s words of greeting, *“Rejoice, so highly favoured! The Lord is with you”*? This we rephrase as, “Hail, Mary, full of grace; the Lord is with you”; next we repeat the words of greeting first spoken by St Elizabeth, *“Of all women you are the most blessed, and blessed is the fruit of your womb”*. The opening words of the “Hail Mary” are not mere pious sentiments, but those recorded in the Gospel as inspired by the Holy Spirit. What an extraordinary privilege afforded us - we can address Mary, *“she who is the highest honour of our race” (Judith 13:18-19),* with words so sanctified!

Wonderful though these words are, there is something even more wonderful still - Mary, our Blessed Mother, guides us to her Son and our Saviour, Jesus Christ the Lord. The focus of the “Hail Mary”, the heart of this treasured prayer, is one word, the Holy Name, “Jesus”; with the whole Church we declare, “*blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus”*. When, with his Blessed Mother, we repeat the name of “Jesus” – *“the name which is above all other names” (Phil.2:9)* – we enter ever more deeply into the life of Jesus. Mary always directs us to Jesus. She, who in her heart and body bore the Son of God, never draws attention to herself, but points to him who was, and is, at the centre of her life – and, we pray, our lives also. In the presence of her Son, Mary prays for us and with us, and so it is, with great confidence, that we can turn to Our Blessed Mother and ask, *“Holy Mary, Mother of God: pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.”*

With the Angel Gabriel’s greeting, Mary’s life took a sudden, unexpected turn; she had been told, *“you are to conceive, and bear a son, and you must name him Jesus”*. This news propelled Mary on an epic and lifelong journey – for her, a journey into the unknown, but undertaken with faith in God’s promise. It first took her to Elizabeth’s home; then to Bethlehem; from there, to escape the wrath of King Herod, she fled, with Joseph and the infant Jesus, to Egypt, returning eventually to Nazareth; years later it brought her to Jerusalem, and then to the foot of the Cross; finally, it carried her to heavenly glory.

Today’s Gospel passage records Mary's journey from Nazareth to visit Elizabeth in Judea – a trip of about ninety miles. In the visitation to Elizabeth, we discern that, although the Angel Gabriel’s annunciation to Mary was an astonishing spiritual experience accepted with deep faith, it would have been only human to have wondered, “Can this be real?”, “Is this really happening to me?” And Mary did what anyone would do in a comparable situation, she sought the support of a trusted friend.

Drawing on our own personal experience, we know that the significance of an important event in our lives, whether it be joyful or sad, cannot be fully acknowledged until it is shared with a trusted friend? We need to be able to confide in another. Mary shared what had happened to her with Elizabeth, and Elizabeth gave the affirmation Mary needed. “Yes!”, Elizabeth says, “It is all true, it is really happening!”; *“Of all women you are the most blessed, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”* So affirmed, Mary allowed her joy to burst forth, *“My soul glorifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God, my Saviour.”*

Sharing that which is most intimate with a trusted friend, brings peace and joy. This is the important lesson that Mary and Elizabeth teach us on this Advent morning. A similar peace and joy, albeit in a somewhat different setting, can be found in the Sacrament of Confession. There, in a very personal and confidential setting, we able to share with a trusted friend the most intimate secrets of our human frailty, and our sinfulness. In that context, our soul-friend, the priest, in the name of Christ, affirms that God hears us; sees our sorrow, knows our good intentions; and forgives us. Then, like Mary, we too can be filled with the joy of knowing God's amazing love; like Mary we can exclaim, *“My soul glorifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God, my Saviour.”* That is the true purpose of Confession. That is the joy of Confession!

These two wonderful, strong women, Mary and Eizabeth, teach us, that psychologically and spiritually, it is good to talk!

*“Lord,*

*with Mary, your mother and our mother, we say,*

*‘Yes, blessed are those who believe in your promises’”*. **Amen.**